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SUBJECT: KOMI: ALL PARTIES REGISTERED; UNITED RUSSIA IN
THE LEAD

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Summary

1. (SBU) Observers in Komi predicted to Poloff in mid-February that United Russia would capture solid pluralities in the March 11 republic-level and local elections, with "For a Just Russia" poised to place a respectable second, and the Communists and LDPR expected to cross the seven percent threshold. National leaders have stymied local representatives of "democratic parties" from joining forces, as a result, there is little prospect of electoral success. The good news is that all parties that sought to register were successful and there has been no reports of "gross" violations of electoral laws. End summary.

Six Parties Registered For Elections

2. (U) On February 7, the Komi Republic's Election Commission (REC) announced that six parties (YR, SR, LDPR, KPRF, SPS and NV) had successfully registered for the March regional elections and would compete in a mixed party-list/single-mandate race for the thirty seats in the newly-enlarged parliament. (There will be fifteen party-list and fifteen single-mandate seats.) In the Republic's current 20 seat parliament, YR deputies control fifteen seats and independents the remaining five. In Ukhta's 25 seat city council, YR deputies now control approximately 13 seats, Yabloko controls 1 seat (Yabloko's Valeriy Torlopov is the deputy chairman of the city council and was selected by his peers. He is no relation to Vladimir Torlopov, a YR member and the current head of the Republic.), and independents the remaining 11. Parties registering for the elections reported no significant problems in either location.

3. (SBU) Since YR membership developed following the last regional elections, the March 11 elections will be the first city elections in which YR is running as the party of power. The head of Ukhta's administration is selected by the city council members from among themselves. The current head of the city is an independent and is running again. The consensus of those with whom Poloff met was that it would be extremely unlikely for the current "independent" city head to be reappointed if YR wins a majority of city council seats.

¶4. (SBU) During a mid-February visit, Komi's United Russia (YR) ideologist and Dean of Syktyvkar State University Vyacheslav Antonov predicted to us that YR would finish first in the region with sixty percent of the vote (and at least 51 percent of the vote in municipal elections), while the Communist Party (KPRF) would be second, and SR a likely third. Although KPRF does not appeal to younger voters, Antonov thought high participation rates by the party's numerous pensioners would allow it to finish strongly. Antonov predicted that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) would reach the seven percent threshold. He believed the more leftwing program of "For a Just Russia" (SR) could appeal to YR and KPRF voters. He predicted that neither the Peoples' Will party (NV) nor the Union of Right Forces (SPS) would make it into the Republic's parliament.

¶5. (SBU) Everyone Poloff spoke to in Komi, regardless of political affiliation, agreed with Antonov's prediction about YR. Most, however, expected SR to run a strong second, despite a merger that saw some members of the regional Russian Party of Life and the Russian Party of Pensioners leaving the fold. Opinions varied widely on prospects for LDPR and the KPRF. LDPR's regional branch has had internal problems and has been forced to rebuild. Due to Komi's "gulag" roots some contacts told Poloff that KPRF had never been genuinely popular in the Republic, although it had always managed to be represented at the federal and local levels.

¶6. (SBU) Igor Sazhin, a leading human rights activist in Komi, was more positive about KPRF's chances. He believed it had an established record, while the newly-minted SR remained a nebulous concept. Sazhin predicted that approximately forty percent of Komi's electorate would not vote. He agreed

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with Antonov that YR would win about sixty percent of the votes cast. Other Embassy contacts agreed that YR would finish first, but with 30 - 40 percent of the vote. SR or KPRF would finish second in their view and the LDPR a more distant fourth. All agreed that SPS and NV would not cross the seven percent threshold.

Administrative Resources On Show

¶7. (SBU) In Syktyvkar, YR's headquarters in the center of town were undergoing extensive renovations and featured well-dressed staff and a "help desk" on the first floor. Poloff met with five of the branch's leaders. They were in charge of: voter outreach, work with civil society, youth groups, ideology, and regional party leadership. The group was well-organized and professional and had plenty of glossy campaign leaflets, key chains, and pens. The youth group leader, a businesswoman who manages a branch of her family's butchery and is running for a seat in the Republic's parliament, was especially impressive. She described the party's regional efforts, which featured seminars to train journalists and a pro bono legal assistance clinic where attorneys from YR's youth group explain laws and legal processes. The remaining parties operated out of very modest, one or two-room offices in rundown buildings with several people typically sharing the lone computer. (It appeared most offices did not have Internet access.) In Ukhta, Komi's second city, most parties were running their campaigns from their homes. The YR branch in Ukhta was a smaller, mirror image of YR Syktyvkar.

SR: "Known Quantity"

18. (SBU) SR's foremost advantage was that its regional list is headed by former head of the Republic Yuriy Spiridonov and former head of the Rodina party's regional branch and former mayor of Syktyvkar Sergey Katunin. Many view Spiridonov as more independent of the Kremlin than the Republic's current YR-led administration. Observers expect that many would vote for SR in order to end YR's monopoly on power. Local media contacts told Poloff that Sergey Mironov, leader of the national SR party, would make a trip to the region before March 11. Katunin alleged that SR had 1,200 members in the Republic, and estimated their number would reach 3000 by March. SR, said Katunin, would win twenty percent of the vote. (Katunin was not a particularly appealing candidate. He exuded a weary cynicism and did not seem charismatic, or particularly trustworthy. The Ukhta city official who accompanied Poloff had done business with Katunin when he was Mayor of Syktyvkar and alleged that he had gone bankrupt as a result of Katunin's "dishonesty.")

SR: Regional Unification Rocky

19. (SBU) Media claims that SR's regional branches were having difficulties unifying were "ploys to discredit" the party, said Katunin. He admitted that some of the leaders of the Pensioners Party and the Party of Life had left during the merger process. We were told by others that the SR constituent parties were not consulted before the merger was announced, nor was there agreement over who would head the regional SR. As a result, support for SR immediately after the merger was very weak. A regional newspaper on February 13 reported that Babakov had flown to Syktyvkar to sort out problems between Katunin and Spiridonov.

LDPR: A Family Affair

110. (SBU) LDPR's Komi regional branch is led by Valeriy Babkov; Babkov's son, Sergey, leads LDPR's Ukhta branch. Currently there are no LDPR members in the Republic's parliament or in the local legislative bodies. However, the region does have one Duma Deputy. According to Sergey, by 2003 inept regional leadership had almost destroyed the party. Since then he and his father have rebuilt the regional and local branches. They allege LDPR has 1300 members in the region and a representative office in each of the Republic's 20 political jurisdictions. The party has 148 candidates running in the March 11 regional and municipal elections (30 split amongst the party list and single-mandate

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seats for the regional parliament, 20 running for seats in Syktyvkar's city council, 6 running in Ukhta city council race, and the remainder competing for seats in other local legislative bodies). Babkov boasted that LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy had visited the Republic five times, most recently on February 10.

KPRF: Back to the USSR

111. (SBU) Leonid Musinov, head of the Komi KPRF, termed SR, Patriots of Russia, and NV "Kremlin creations" whose purpose was to reduce the influence/power of his party. Throughout the meeting Musinov returned to the fall of the USSR and the U.S.'s alleged role in it. His main point was that Russians enjoyed a much higher standard of living during the Soviet period and would live better now had the USSR survived.

End of an Era? SPS and Yabloko

¶12. (SBU) Aleksandr Popov, the leader of SPS's Syktyvkar chapter and a former mayor of a small Komi city, said that national authorities were resisting the SPS regional branch's efforts to cooperate with Yabloko. Yabloko's local leader in Ukhta, Valeriy Torlopov, is the current deputy chairman of the Ukhta City Council, where he has served for seventeen years, and is well-respected in the Republic. Constituents have resisted his recent attempts to retire. Torpolov criticized the national leaders of democratic parties for their failure to develop projects that would better reflect the parties' platforms. Neither SPS nor Yabloko is expected to win seats in the Republic's parliament.

Another YR Monopoly

¶13. (SBU) Igor Sazhin, Head of Memorial's Syktyvkar branch, described to us a very slight erosion of freedom of speech in the Republic over the past two years. He listed two specific examples of media products that had been canceled and/or otherwise silenced because their coverage had at times portrayed Komi Republic authorities in a less than flattering light. He mentioned that a provocative regional television talk show "Detail & Detail" was canceled after a number of its episodes included participants critical of the regional government. Also closed was the local newspaper "Zyryanye Life" (www.zyryane.ru). Sazhin characterized the newspaper as having extremely well-written stories that offered viewpoints different from those found in the Republic-owned/controlled publications. He alleged that after several articles reporting on nationalist and extremist movements in the Republic, the newspaper was taken to court and fined 20,000 rubles. The owner sold his shares of the company and the newspaper was eventually evicted from its offices. Journalists continued online publication, using their own funds, until December 2006.

¶14. (SBU) Two independent sources corroborated Sazhin's comments. Igor Bobrakov, senior editor of the new magazine "Sign" and a USG exchange program alumnus, agreed with Sazhin and added his own tale of having lost a previous editing director job at a local Syktyvkar newspaper after it printed stories critical of the regional government. Without endorsing Sazhin's conclusions, Pavel Kochanov, General Director of the Internet-based Komionline news agency (www.komionline.ru), confirmed an "almost imperceptible" decrease in opposition opinion in local media. With more than eighty active media outlets in the Republic it would be difficult to prove a perceptible erosion of freedom of speech, he said. His personal experience, similar to that of Bobrakov, however, showed that reporting critical of government officials in the Republic, is not viewed kindly. Kochanov was forced to leave his job as director of Komiinform (www.komiinform.ru), the newspaper controlled by the Republic's Administration, when stories were published documenting the shortcomings of government officials. Upon leaving Komiinform, about 10 years ago, Kochanov started Komionline, which provides news to Komi media outlets.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) Although YR will win a plurality in the Republic's

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Parliament as well as in other legislative bodies, conversations during the mid-February visit revealed some positive developments:

-- All parties that sought to participate in the regional elections were successfully registered.

-- Despite complaints of lack of access to administrative resources, there have been no reports of "gross" violations

of electoral law.

-- There are opportunities for popular local candidates, like former Republic head Spiridonov and current deputy head of Ukhta's city council, Yabloko's Torpolov, to win seats in the March elections.

¶16. (SBU) Finally, given its wealth of administrative resources and control of the Republic's power levers, winning only thirty percent of the vote in the Republic elections, as some in Komi predict, would certainly be seen by YR Syktyvkar as tantamount to defeat.

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